

Bertolt Brecht

ground covered with puddles, which not only helped motivate the various forms of movement that contributed to the characterisation (agile leaps, fastidious teetering on tip-toe) but also contributed to the symbolism: water, the essential of life, mixed with earth and cement-dust to produce dirty, unproductive mud. Although clearly much more atmospheric than any of Brecht's own productions, Strehler's ability to intensify the emotional impact of the play without prejudice to the clarity of the argument seems a quite legitimate development of Brechtian theatre and one which justifies Brecht's remark, in a letter to the still relatively young Strehler, that he would like to leave him the rights to perform his plays throughout Europe.

Frå  
Ronald Speirs, Bertolt Brecht,  
Macmillan Modern Dramatists,  
Basingstoke and London, 1987.

## The Caucasian Chalk Circle

### 9

Now regarded as a classic example of Epic Theatre, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* developed, ironically enough, from an invitation to Brecht arranged by the actress, Luise Rainer, to write a play she could perform on Broadway, a commission which prompted him to cast in theatrical form a story he had written some years previously ('The Augsburg Chalk Circle'). Initially the commission inspired him with little enthusiasm 'in this empty place, devoid of wishes'. Only a week after sending off the completed manuscript to Rainer, Brecht suddenly felt dissatisfied with the concessions he had made to the audience's presumed taste for idealised heroines:

Suddenly I am no longer content with Grusha in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. She should be simple-minded, look like Brueghel's *Dulle Griet*, a beast of burden. She should be mulish rather than uppity, willing rather than good, have stamina rather than incorruptibility, etc., etc. This simplicity should on no account signify 'wisdom'

Protagonist  
Aussie Rainer  
Brechtian  
allying her with  
words  
He goes in excell  
culturally, his identity  
Kempner

Bertolt Brecht

(that is the familiar cliché), although it is quite compatible with a practical disposition, even with cunning and an eye for human qualities. Grusha, by being stamped with the backwardness of her class, should invite less identification, and thus present objectively a figure who in a certain sense is tragic ('the salt of the earth').

(KM, 23)

Brecht revised the text in an attempt to meet his own objections. These revisions did not, however, succeed in reducing Grusha's attractiveness as a figure of identification to anything like the extent he once thought was necessary. As John Willett has observed, 'he does not seem to have altered her much or provided those practical motives for her goodness which Feuchtwanger (who thought her "too holy") has asked for' (7, 214). If anything, the changes, by emphasising the part played by Grusha's simple-mindedness in her getting 'landed' with someone else's child, made her more rather than less moving. Despite its many 'epic' features, the finished play makes powerful emotional appeals which are not basically dissimilar from those made by the products of Broadway or Hollywood.

The scenes telling the ancient story of Grusha and the 'high-born child' are made into a play within a play by being preceded by a scene set in the contemporary world, entitled 'The Struggle for the Valley', and followed by an epilogue pointing a moral that applies equally to the ancient case and the modern one. Two peasant collectives from Georgia in the Soviet Union are in dispute about which one has the better claim to a valley. One is a group of goat-herdsmen who used to graze their flocks here until they were driven away by the invading German army. The other group want to develop the land for fruit-farming, proposing to irrigate

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

it with the help of a new reservoir. In Brecht's original conception of the play the dispute was to be settled with the aid of the play within the play, the ancient case demonstrating the principle that greater productivity constitutes a better claim to the land than traditional rights of possession. In the final version of the play the dispute is settled by amicable discussion before the play within the play is performed, so that this now has the character of a celebration of the wisdom of the people in reaching their agreement. If the original version exemplified Brecht's idea of practical, 'interventionist' (*eingreifendes*), problem-solving theatre, the revised version illustrates the more general conception of aesthetic education elaborated in the *Short Organum for the Theatre*.

Friedrich Schiller, the most famous German exponent of aesthetic education, once drew a distinction between two types of writing or writer: the 'sentimental', by which he meant a reflective, self-aware and self-questioning type, and the 'naïve' type, such as is found in heroic poetry, where the shared values of writer and audience are treated as unproblematic. Brecht implicitly rejected any such distinction by arguing for and practising a form of theatre that was 'naïve' while at the same time addressing itself to the audience's capacity for reflection. Naïveté as Brecht understood it was firstly a matter of not pretending that the stage was anything but a stage, of rejecting the naturalistic assumption that, say, a crowd needed to be represented by a stage full of extras. But Brecht's theatre was also naïve in the Schillerian sense in that it laid claim to a clear and firm set of human and political values which it propounded in a partisan way. Communism, as Brecht put it, was 'the simple thing that is difficult to achieve' (*'Das Einfache, das schwer zu machen ist'*) (GW2, 852).

Brecht's liking for the 'naïve' is embodied in the person

Mem framings  
Grusha's  
id...  
for...  
Grusha's  
+ ...  
mir...  
W...

Schiller: naïve or sentimental  
Brecht: eingreifend  
Ticket has been laid  
naïve or reflected.

Bertolt Brecht

Song form  
naïve

of Arkadi Cheidse, 'The Singer', described as 'a sturdy man of simple manners' who has the task of directing the play to be performed by the peasants. The characterisation of this figure reflects his status as a representative of the tradition of folk poetry and repository of ancient wisdom with which Brecht wanted to see his own work aligned. Naïve, too, are the forms in which the scenes of the Singer's epic poem are dramatised: the story of Grusha frequently has the quality of secularised legend, while that of Azdak recalls the farcical adventures of a German folk-hero, the prankster Till Eulenspiegel. Brecht asked his designer, Karl von Appen, to bring out the folksy, primitive quality of the fable in the grouping and costumes of the figures - for example, by making the seams on robes raised and apparently clumsy, just as they are on the figures in Nativity scenes (Krippenszenen) in rural churches.

naïveté  
folk hero

The motivation for all this naïveté lies partly in the fact that the peasants of the prologue live in a country where feudalism still survived until quite recently, indeed until within living memory. The other justification for the naïveté of the peasants' play about Grusha and Azdak lies in the fact of the Russian Revolution, an event that has brought the wheel of history full circle, so to speak, emancipating men from class-structures and enabling them to start building history anew by re-shaping social life according to natural, though long forgotten principles. From the point of view of what is assumed to be a qualitatively new way of life, the centuries when all history was the history of class struggle seem to belong to quite another epoch, so that the long historical process of class antagonism, because it supposedly no longer enmeshes the lives of these Soviet citizens, can be simplified to the point where it becomes the stuff of ballad, legend and farce.

prologue

While the fiction that the play within the play is based on

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

an old folk epic or ballad creates a framework of convention within which the simplifications of the parable-like tale of Grusha and Azdak might be made acceptable to a modern audience, the account of contemporary history offered by the introductory 'Struggle for the Valley' is naïve in a merely negative sense, if not downright disingenuous. The real history of Soviet agricultural collectivisation was one of coercion and resistance. Whereas the peasants in Brecht's play relinquish the valley that was their home after only the mildest of protests, so seduced are their minds by the 'sly' plans for irrigation, for many Russian peasants the loss of their homelands was a matter of being herded into cattle-trucks and forcibly deported (if they survived the journey) to some distant corner of the Soviet territory. Not surprisingly, the Utopian prologue, unconvincing wherever it is performed, simply has to be omitted in any Russian production.

sheep  
by the way  
make

As one would expect from a play making extensive use of naïve dramatic forms, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is rich in emotive effects.<sup>1</sup> The main focus of the play's emotional appeal is, of course, the maid Grusha. Even before she decides to take responsibility for the baby that has been abandoned in the panic of a palace revolution by everyone else, including its mother, Grusha is presented in an attractive light in two scenes where she is first teased and then proposed to by the soldier Simon. Her attraction resides in a directness and honesty of feeling that seems to be a beneficial consequence of the fact that she is rather naïve and not very quick on the uptake - though she is not lacking in good sense, as her warning to Simon against any unnecessary heroics makes clear.

In the last scene of the first act, when she finally picks up the abandoned child and goes off with it in search of a refuge, the emotive effect has been carefully built up by the

To make it more naïve:  
Horned head:  
Cage: for folk hero &  
ballad stuff

Abt 1: negative naïve:  
woman

Naïve dramatic  
is naïve for  
emotive effects,  
first of prologue

*Bertolt Brecht*

preceding scenes. In them the audience has seen how the child's mother, wife of the city governor, simply forgets about her baby in her concern first to select which clothes she will take with her and then with her own safety; that the other servants, including the child's nurse, are as ruthless as Natella Abashvili in putting their own interests first and simply abandoning 'the brat' to its fate rather than risk being caught with a child whom the new masters will want to kill; how a group of soldiers under the command of the 'Fat Prince' carry in on the point of a lance the severed head of the governor and impale it above the palace gate. It even seems for a moment that Grusha too, after wrapping the child in some of Natella's abandoned clothes and bedding it down amongst the luggage, is going to follow the advice and example of the other servants. However, just as she is on the point of leaving, she hears the child, through the voice of the Singer, 'speaking' to her and asking for her help. It is of course her conscience telling her that she will never again know peace of mind if she ignores the plight of the child:

The child

Called to her, not whining but calling quite  
sensibly  
At least so it seemed to her: 'Woman', it said,  
'Help me'.  
Went on calling not whining but calling quite  
sensibly:  
'Don't you know, woman, that she who does not  
listen to a cry for help  
But passes by shutting her ears, will never hear  
The gentle call of a lover  
Nor the blackbird at dawn, nor the happy  
Sigh of the exhausted grape-picker at the sound  
of the Angelus. (7, 164)

*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*

Grusha then spends the night watching over the child, fetching milk for it and keeping it warm, while around her the city is filled with flames and the tumult of civil war. By daybreak she finds – as the audience has already hoped and guessed – that she has sat too long:

Too long she sat, too long she watched  
The soft breathing, the little fists  
Till towards morning the temptation grew too  
strong. (7, 165)

The emotional bond forged between Grusha, the child and the audience in the first act is strengthened as the action unfolds. She leaves the city and sets off for the Northern Mountains, hoping to find shelter for herself and the child with her brother who has married into a relatively rich farm. During the journey she encounters one difficulty or danger after another, each situation throwing her human worth into ever clearer relief. She has to pay an extortionate sum (half a week's wages) from her very meagre means to buy just one drink of milk for Michael, and is willing to pay an even more outrageous sum, equivalent to ten weeks' pay, just to have some shelter for Michael at night from the icy winds coming down from the Janga Tau glacier – and at the same time to be exposed to the heartlessness of a pair of aristocratic women refugees.

The greatest threat to Grusha and the child comes from two soldiers who are pursuing them in order to gain the reward on the child's head. Utterly exhausted by the forced march into the mountains burdened with the weight of the child, Grusha decides at one point that the best thing for both of them is for her to leave the child at the door of a peasant cottage. Once she sees that Michael has been carried into the hut by the woman, Grusha sets off in the

Det emotionelle båndet  
Gr. - barnet - publikum  
blev styrket efter  
høret.

Bertolt Brecht

opposite direction, laughing at the success of her ploy and pleased to be free of a burden that had become too great for her, yet deeply saddened at the loss of the child.

This was one of the points where Brecht wanted to make it clear that Grusha's relationship with the child is not one of simple saintliness. She still has interests of her own, separate from and even at odds with those of Michael, for she has another, older attachment, to the soldier Simon, and wants to be free to find him when the civil war is over.

On the other hand, it is evident that she can only bring herself to leave Michael because it seems in the child's best interests: she fears that she cannot go on fleeing fast enough to keep ahead of their pursuers, and believes that Michael stands a better chance of survival in the unlikely hiding-place of a distant peasant cottage. In the end, though, this attempt at separation functions as a kind of emotional 'retardation' which has the effect, not of reducing but of intensifying the forward thrust of the action towards an ever closer emotional identification between the woman and the child. Grusha has hardly gone a few steps when she runs into the pursuing *Panzerreiter* (Iron-shirts or armoured cavalrymen), and, questioned as to the whereabouts of the missing child, flees in panic back to the hut, thereby leading them unintentionally to the child. In a scene of ever rising emotional suspense the soldier in command comes close to taking possession of the child, and is only prevented from doing so by Grusha's desperate courage in attacking him with a block of wood.

This is not an isolated case of Brecht's use of conventional dramatic suspense in the play. Having adopted the child as her own by substituting rags for his fine linen and baptising it with glacier water (a symbolic initiation into the harshness of a poor person's life), Grusha has to risk both their lives crossing a chasm spanned by a primitive bridge

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

with rotten boards and one broken guide-rope. To make matters worse, the light is waning and a storm is blowing up. Grusha makes it across, of course, her courage being emphasised (as it was in the scene in the peasant hut) by contrast with the passivity of some merchants encamped by the bridge and the cowardice of her pursuers. The scene could have been taken straight from a Hollywood adventure movie (in fact, as Brecht was an avid film-goer, this may well have been its inspiration).

A whole range of different emotive effects is employed in *Act Three*, which deals with Grusha's experiences once she has reached the farmstead in the Northern Mountains where her brother lives. Even here her sufferings and problems are far from being at an end. When Grusha enters the farmhouse she is so weak and ill that she can barely stand unaided. Yet the response of her well-fed sister-in-law, who completely dominates her husband, is suspicious to the point of hostility, for she sees in Grusha, whom she takes to be the mother of an illegitimate child, merely a threat to her own respectability (she is 'pious', as the brother explains) and a drain on the resources of her household. Here, as so often in the play, those who could best afford to help prove to be the least willing to do so. When Grusha collapses during the sister-in-law's interrogation her brother is about to carry her to the bench by the stove but his wife orders him instead to let her lie on a sack by the wall. The scene exploits the audience's sympathetic identification with Grusha in the same way as countless similar scenes in popular melodrama, a tradition that survived into the twentieth century principally in the shape of the 'tear-jerker' type of film; despite his general show of cynicism the young Brecht confessed to having been deeply affected by one of Chaplin's contributions to this genre, a film entitled *Alcohol and Love*.<sup>2</sup>

Ally in white dress  
Strophic effect  
12:11 0.6m

No 1  
Lwyt's will  
A. S. M. M.

Bertolt Brecht

In subsequent scenes Brecht uses effects of emotional dissonance to bring home Grusha's plight to the audience. As long as the mountain passes are blocked by snow she and Michael are allowed to stay at the farm - provided they eat little, make no complaints about the cold and provided Grusha works hard for the sister-in-law. Once the spring comes, however, bringing with it the danger that her pursuers will come here to find her, the brother insists on arranging a marriage for Grusha. During the scene when he announces this plan the air is filled with the increasingly regular sound of drops of water melting from the ice on the roof of the barn (an effect rendered symbolically by a *glockenspiel*), so as to produce conflicting emotional associations of beauty and release from the miseries of winter on the one hand and of the combined threat to Grusha's happiness presented by the pursuing soldiers and the unwanted husband on the other.

Grusha, still faithful to Simon, only agrees to her brother's plan because she is assured that the marriage will be merely a formality to gain respectability and legitimising papers for the child and herself. In that the intended husband is already on his death-bed. The ensuing marriage scene, grotesque enough to begin with, turns into outright farce when the 'dying' man, on hearing that the war is over, gets up from his bed and shoos away the guests: it turns out that he has only been shamming to avoid being called-up. Yet the comic aspect of the scene is intermingled disturbingly with an aspect bordering on the tragic. As the guests chatter about the end of the war, attention is focused on Grusha's deeply distressed reaction to this most untimely reminder of Simon and her promise to wait for him until he returns from the war. Soon she is to experience still greater distress, however, for when Simon eventually comes to find her at the farm the tense emotions of both of them make it

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

impossible for her to explain to him the true state of affairs. As they stand facing each other on opposite sides of a stream, hostile soldiers appear with Michael in their possession. In a last, desperate attempt to prevent Michael's abduction Grusha has to claim, in Simon's presence, that she is the boy's mother - to no avail. The child is taken away and Grusha can only run after the disappearing soldiers. Having risked her love for Simon to save Michael, it now appears that her reward is to lose both of them. Thus the main part of Grusha's story ends on a note of high suspense as to the outcome for Grusha and Michael. This sense of an incomplete emotional pattern means that the audience keeps the fate of Grusha and Michael in their minds as the Singer turns their attention to the story of Azdak, the judge who is to decide between the competing claims on Michael of Grusha, his adoptive mother, and the biological mother, Natella Abashvili.

Whereas Grusha's story mainly employed effects of sentiment, heroism or pathos (with occasional touches of comedy) to draw the audience into her struggle to behave humanely in a society where the majority of men of all classes are alienated from their own humanity by conflicts of material interest, the tale of Azdak the judge relies mainly on comedy (with occasional touches of pathos) to evoke sympathy for a rather different, less self-sacrificing approach to the defence of humane values in a hostile world.

Originally, Brecht had intended Azdak to be a thoroughly 'Till Eulenspiegel' or Schweykian type of character, a knave and a fool whose rulings, when he is elevated from village clerk to judge, result in something resembling justice quite by accident, as a by-product of his pursuit of fun and self-gratification. In the event, however, Brecht's Azdak did not turn out to be utterly 'self-centred, amoral

theg spanning, eit  
for all the...  
Natella Abashvili  
Azdak's wife  
Azdak's daughter  
Azdak's wife  
Azdak's daughter  
Azdak's wife  
Azdak's daughter  
Azdak's wife  
Azdak's daughter  
Azdak's wife  
Azdak's daughter

Bertolt Brecht

and parasitic (. . .) the lowest, most depraved judge there has ever been'. (KM, 22) Rather, as Brecht later reminded the actor taking this role, he is 'a man of utterly unblemished character, a disappointed revolutionary who plays the part of a man gone to the dogs, just as in Shakespeare wise men play the part of fools'. (KM, 94)

Has gods  
lyric in  
new bli  
shak. inst  
dram

The good heart beneath the gruff exterior (although vehemently denied by Azdak) is the first thing to be revealed about the man when he is introduced giving shelter to a fugitive. Admittedly, when Azdak recognises from the fugitive's manner that the man he is sheltering comes from the upper classes, his own class-consciousness (which is much more developed than Grusha's) makes him inclined to throw the man out, but in fact he cannot bring himself to hand over someone in terror of his life to the police, even if he is an aristocrat. On discovering that he has thereby spared the life of the hated Grand Prince, however, Azdak rushes into the city to confess his guilt before the popular revolutionary forces whom he falsely assumes to have seized power. Yet even here his behaviour is dictated at least as much by a human motive as it is by respect for the principles of class-struggle; in this case the human aspect is his wish to save his own neck by throwing himself on the mercy of the revolution:

(He acts with expansive gestures, looking sideways at the Ironshirts.)

'Out of ignorance I let the Grand Swindler escape. Tear me to pieces, brothers!' So as to get in first. (7, 204-5)

Although the soldiers he addresses are not the arm of a proletarian revolution, but merely mercenaries of the new aristocratic masters who have just bloodily suppressed an uprising amongst the carpet weavers, they decide to

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

appoint Azdak in place of the judge they have just hanged. Their motives, too, are a mixture of class-resentment of those whose inept decisions they have to carry out, enjoyment of the power given them by their importance in a situation of civil war, dislike of and admiration for this upstart, ragged village clerk: 'The Judge was always a rascal. Now the rascal shall be the Judge.' (7, 212)

During this period in the office of judge, with which he has been 'landed' much as Grusha was with responsibility for Michael, Azdak holds the sympathy of the audience by virtue of the amusing, witty way he combines self-interest (always at the cost of the better-off) with concern to provide a modicum of justice for those brought before him. Because the palace revolution has not brought about the onset of a 'new age', but merely an age of 'new masters', Azdak realises that he cannot act on the basis of a new conception of justice, but must simply adapt to his own purposes the existing legal system. His way of proceeding is dialectical, exemplifying what Brecht defined as 'the negation of a negation'; because the existing laws are designed to protect the interests of the property-owning classes, Azdak always finds in favour of those who have none, basing himself on the assumption that the ultimate cause of the 'crimes' brought before him is to be found in the inequitable distribution of wealth in society. Until a revolution has created conditions in which there is no longer any fundamental conflict of interest between an individual or section of society and society at large (as in the 'Struggle for the Valley'), Azdak's rough class-justice is the best his individual reason can make of a society founded on unreasonable principles.

If the audience's sympathies for Azdak are angled for throughout by such details as his habit of sitting on the law-book and drinking good red wine while delivering

Jan. 1944 in ex period  
held Ad. publ. system  
old a. 1944  
dial. - internal perspective  
med. in. world self-port.  
Na  
Tilpassa de mine kigra  
humbler of Kalluifer  
Hil det sk. sk. sk.  
reth. system.

Publ. sympathy  
for Azd. - sympathy  
of only i. sk. sk.  
reth.

Bertolt Brecht

judgement, or the sentimental scene where he places an old peasant woman on the judge's seat, these sympathies are most fully gratified in the final act of the play, when Azdak has to decide whether Michael should go to Grusha or Natella Abashvili. It is quite clear that Natella is only interested in recovering her own child because he is heir to his father's property, whereas Grusha wants to keep the boy, at least for a few years longer, because she wants to help him grow up healthy, happy and useful to others.

Although instinctively predisposed towards Grusha simply because she is a poor working woman, Azdak decides to put this intuitive sympathy to the test by subjecting the woman to the ancient trial of the chalk circle. The child has to stand in the middle and the competing 'mothers' are to try to pull him out on one side or the other. The test is made twice, and twice it is Natella who pulls Michael out of the circle, not because she is physically stronger, but because Grusha cannot bring herself to hurt Michael by making him the object of a tug-of-war. In finding that the test has proved Grusha to be the true mother of Michael, Azdak acts in accordance with the traditional trial of the chalk circle, except in one fundamental respect: the woman whom he recognises to be the 'true' mother is not the one who gave birth to the child but the one who 'stole' the child and became its mother by virtue of what she has done for it. Underlying this judgement is Brecht's Marxist belief that, unlike other animals, man's life is not principally defined or to be judged in biological terms, but as a process of self-creation or productivity. For Azdak the past therefore carries weight only in as much as it is relevant to the future: he does not decide which woman has the better right to 'possess' the child, but bases his judgement on the child's right to a good mother, and so grants Grusha the privilege of bearing the

Draman: byggingur  
pa marastuam  
anti-bidopuau  
pa forskillingu  
om a kennu  
sympati, pa  
produlhritels-  
byspau.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

responsibility for Michael's further upbringing. Nevertheless, the audience is bound to regard the verdict as a reward for the hardships Grusha has suffered on behalf of Michael. Like all happy endings, it brings to a satisfying conclusion the emotional curve of the action.

The emotive quality of Brecht's construction of character and plot was reinforced by features of staging and performance in his own production of the play for the Berliner Ensemble, a production which won critical acclaim at the Paris Theatre festival in 1955, and subsequently in other capitals. Angelika Hurwicz's acting of the role of Grusha, for example, was generally felt to be very moving: 'Angelika Hurwicz plays the part for long stretches with all the means of the dramatic theatre. She affects us deeply. At times she is breathtakingly magnificent' (Fritz Erpenbeck)<sup>3</sup>; 'a powerful, moving impression is produced by Angelika Hurwicz's exceedingly sensitive, vigorous embodiment of Grusha's beautiful motherliness' (Hermann Martin).<sup>4</sup> Ernst Busch's interpretation of Azdak, similarly, was felt to be 'a figure bursting with life to an uncommon degree' and one in which full rein was given to this actor's 'markedly individual temperament' (Peter Edel).<sup>5</sup>

One of the means whereby Brecht caused Grusha in particular to be a focus of emotional attention was his use of masks. These masks are frequently cited as an example of Brecht's alienation effect, which they certainly were, in the sense that they signalled in an obviously allegorical manner the emotional rigidity and reduced (that is to say, socially alienated) humanity of those wearing them - the upper classes and their lackeys. At the same time as being intellectually apprehended signs, however, these masks had a tactile-emotive suggestiveness that was emphasised through contrast with the naked, natural faces of those

Stika blid upfalet i liti  
ait ho ogjantil omu hollu  
som had nell ki bant  
muu puat ndun far det  
prindipit a forthe haa  
k'level: pabilteen opp-  
levis d'ite temojant  
som am belonung for stant  
Denne vil k'ogjantil i  
stjokk'ly just betilla.

Nashun v'ait m'adid  
ki a velho umojant  
sympati dei v'astad's  
shupant, illingjantjant  
muu v' am b'ant po  
v'eklassun v' k'ans  
leleia.  
Vel b'antad blid dei  
v'akun, m'akulj' am'itk  
at dei antu tilfont  
sympati, inkl'ing.



Bertolt Brecht

characters for whom the play arouses sympathy. As well as representing the cruelty of the powerful by means of similar devices of stylisation to those employed by Walt Disney (Natella Abashvili's mask strongly recalls the face of the Wicked Queen in Snow White), the hard, stiff material of the masks forms part of a pattern of contrasts between hardness and softness running through the play: between the soft, thin, close-fitting dress worn by Grusha and the heavy, stiff robes worn by the Governor and his wife (repeated in the contrast of Michael's original shawl with the rags in which Grusha dresses him); between the armour of the soldiers or 'Ironshirts' and the flesh of Grusha, exposed when she vainly tries to still Michael by suckling him at her empty breast; between the heavy judicial robes and the thin rags Azdak still wears beneath them (emphasised in the 1976 Ensemble production by Ekkehard Schall's repeated exposure of his naked backside); between coins and milk; between ice and flowing water. Such contrasts are connotative as well as denotative, enhancing the appeal of the vulnerably human by focusing on its isolation in a world dominated by alien things - money and the weapons needed to gain or keep possession of it.

The allusion to crib scenes of Mary with the infant Jesus implied in the staging of the night-scene where Grusha watches over the baby, is similarly part of a symbolic, associative and emotive pattern running through the play. It exemplifies what Brecht defined as the *Umfunktionierung* of tradition, a process of taking over traditional material and assigning some new function, significance or value to it. In this case Brecht was offering the story of Grusha and Michael as a humanist re-fashioning of the Christian account of the 'Holy Family', interpreting the origin of the 'High-Born Child' in social terms, and stressing the working-class nature of the 'lowly' condition

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

into which he is pitched and the inherent worth and dignity of a simply human life founded on work and human warmth in need of no transcendent associations to magnify it. At the same time, however, Brecht was thereby mobilising a traditionally ingrained awe of 'pure motherhood' to reinforce the impact Grusha has on the audience. Much the same is true of numerous allusions to Christ's Passion in the story of Azdak - mocking soldiers dress him in a travesty of a judge's (king's) dress. He is reviled by them and prepared for execution, and asks for a drink (in this case red wine) to ease his suffering - so that his ill-treatment acquires a greater weight of pathos, becoming a symbol of man's repeated inhumanity to other 'sons of men'.

This analysis, which could be extended to cover other expressive features of the play such as the at times pathetic language, should suffice to demonstrate that the basis of Brecht's rhetorical strategy in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was an appeal to the spectator's emotions - including the 'tear and pity' of Aristotelian drama. Having established this, however, one has to consider the contribution made to the overall effect of the play by its epic, alienating, or non-illusionistic features: the interventions of the Singer to direct or comment on the actions of the characters or to describe their feelings as they themselves stand silent; the light, stylised sets such as the backdrops after the manner of Chinese brush-drawings; the concentrated, paradoxical language used by the Singer and sometimes by Azdak (a link stressed by Brecht's choice of Ernst Busch to play both parts in his production) - lines such as 'Terrible is the temptation to do good' or the exchange of proverbs between Simon and Azdak in the court-room, for example, 'I love you like a father,' said the Czar to the peasants, and had the Czarevitch's head chopped off.'

Devices like this need not necessarily reduce the emo-

Sh...  
f...  
k...  
o...  
a...  
obv

parallel...  
G...  
N...  
U...  
L...

Det...  
i...  
der...  
pi...  
G...

Styl...  
p...  
F...  
B...  
S...  
H...  
A...  
f...

Si...  
L...  
f...

Bertolt Brecht

tional impact of a play. Audiences can adapt very quickly to different, even mixed conventions (consider pantomime, for example, where narration and action, burlesque and sentiment can co-exist perfectly happily), and intellectual clarification is far from being incompatible with emotive power: "Terrible is the temptation to do good" strikes the heart as well as the mind. On the other hand, when Brecht's production of the play was first presented to the public, it was evident that he had put obstacles in the way of the spectator's quick adaptation to his mix of conventions.

The East German critic, Fritz Erpenbeck, for example, who confessed to being impressed and moved by some aspects of the play, was disturbed by what seemed to be its stylistic inconsistency, as when Angelika Hurwicz's playing of Grusha would suddenly change from being passionate to dispassionate: 'She suddenly freezes; the Singer informs the audience of what she is thinking. Or she will deliver her lines in a consciously monotonous manner - narrating like some other person standing by the side of the character. Or, directly before a passage that leads us to expect supreme human pathos, she will suddenly and deliberately shut off all emotion in order to report soberly on her emotion. That is an aesthetic contradiction.'<sup>6</sup> Erpenbeck went on to explain that he could accept and enjoy a consistently stylised type of presentation, such as he was familiar with in the theatre of the Far East, or one that was consistently realistic and direct in its emotional appeal. What irritated him in Brecht's production of *The Chalk Circle*, because he was unable to perceive the purpose it served, was the hard, unmediated juxtaposition of heterogeneous theatrical conventions.

Brecht had, of course, a conscious reason for not wanting to supply the kind of aesthetic consistency expected and demanded by Erpenbeck. He wanted to inhibit any tend-

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

ency on the part of the spectator to watch a play from within the security of a familiar, convention-governed set of expectations, believing that this tended to reduce experience in the theatre to mere theatrical experience, something that was kept in a separate compartment from other kinds and areas of experience. One of Brecht's early reflections on the theatre expresses his ambition to engage the spectator with the *substance* of a play rather than its style, and outlines a strategy for achieving this end:

Once I get my hooks on a theatre I shall hire two clowns. They will perform in the interval and pretend to be spectators. They will bandy opinions about the play and about the members of the audience. Make bets on the outcome. (. . .) For tragedies the scene-changes will take place with the curtain up. Clowns will stroll across the stage, giving orders (. . .) The clowns will laugh about any hero as about a private individual. Absurd incidents, anecdotes, jokes. (. . .) The idea would be to bring reality back to the things on the stage. For God's sake, it's the *things* that need to be criticised - the action, words, gestures - not their execution.

(D, 32)

Two critics, Christiane Kaemmel and Alfred Voelkel, who were evidently familiar with and sympathetic to Brecht's intentions defended the use of this type of technique in *The Chalk Circle* production:

The dramatic tension of the action is so powerful that its interruption by the Singer is felt as a brutal intrusion. This brutality is, however, appropriate and indeed necessary: one is forced thereby to pay attention to the motives and consequences of the actions performed on

Brecht's thought was  
that, as a human at  
heart - someone who  
felt in the heart!  
How will bridge  
again human bridge  
to the heart.  
Ein mal die stillig,  
om i regnum!

Man kann verstehen  
die Idee der Umkehr-  
nung.  
Intellektuell klar  
die Umkehrung!  
Doch die Umkehr-  
ung ist die Umkehrung!  
Man kann verstehen  
die Idee der Umkehr-  
nung.  
Intellektuell klar  
die Umkehrung!  
Doch die Umkehr-  
ung ist die Umkehrung!

Bertolt Brecht

stage. The spectator is freed from a purely subjective participation in the characters' experience and returned to the position of an objective observer. The Singer interprets a sequence of events which already belong to the past. In this way the direct impact of the play is inhibited in order to profile the issues more sharply.<sup>7</sup>

It would be to overlook a genuine problem, however, if one were simply to accept this defence of Brecht's practice (on the basis of Brecht's own theories) and to dismiss Erpenbeck's objections as those of a traditionalist unwilling to open his mind to new departures in the theatre. Whatever one thinks of Erpenbeck, it has to be noted that he was not alone in voicing such criticisms of the production. Hermann Martin, too, felt that 'the epic element has become disproportionately strong', while Peter Edel was disturbed by the *erklügelt* (cerebral, over-elaborate, lacking in spontaneity) impression made by the style of direction. Friedrich Luft, a leading critic from West Berlin, although favourably impressed by previous visits to the Ensemble, argued in a similar vein that Brecht's work had gone off the rails in this instance:

Whereas in earlier productions a refreshing and clarifying effect resulted from a fruitful cooling-down of the manner of presentation, Brecht is now labouring away as if in a refrigerator, utterly unmindful of his public. Clearly quite isolated, he has lost his way. This production has been rehearsed and worked-over for nigh on a year. The result is something artificial, pernickety and overdone, and is therefore boring in a very exhausting way - for four whole hours.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear, then, that the effect intended by Brecht's

The Caucasian Chalk Circle

alienation devices, that of concentrating critical attention on the substance of the play was not necessarily the effect they actually produced. In fact the effect could be the very opposite: the devices evidently struck some spectators as obtrusive, attracting attention to themselves rather than to the matters at issue. The reason why this problem became particularly acute in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is to be found, I believe, in the fact that the alienation devices, particularly when employed in scenes involving Grusha, had little to bite on. Although Brecht tried to point to the contradictions in her behaviour, these are relatively weak in comparison with the contradictions in the lives of Mother Courage or Galileo; Grusha was simply cast in too ideal a mould, and was too naïve a character, to throw much light on the conflicts generated by life in a class-society. It is also striking that Brecht particularly tended to intervene with commentary from the Singer in scenes depicting emotions of a tender nature. Apart from some personal aversion on Brecht's part to the direct depiction of emotions of this kind, Erpenbeck is surely right in saying that the reasons for the intervention of the Singer at some of these moments are neither obvious nor compelling.

A further difficulty arising from Brecht's alienating interruptions of the dramatic flow was a loss of tempo in a play that was already unusually long. In consequence, there was a tendency for the spectator to lose the thread and a sense of the epic whole to which the individual scenes contributed: 'Because of all these distractions (. . .) I lost sight of the threads of the two main plots which are only joined up in the final scene.' (Hermann Martin)

It seems, then, that Brecht was counting his chickens before they were hatched when he observed during work on the play: 'It is of course our new public that permits and obliges us to aim at precisely those effects which rest on a

Difer: Brecht's teori  
meil Verf. - efekter,  
har dikje nodvendig  
sløpt borte effekt

Grusha: ligesom i at  
Verf. - eff. borte resultat  
Grusha, har ikke i borte  
Ho er for ideell,  
for naive

Dermed: Brecht's  
V-effekt for tempoet  
i handlingen til i anden  
for mykje. Vi ønsker  
briden.

Litteratør  
Spektatør vil se  
produksjonen i t.d.  
Erpenbeck =  
Hermann Martin

Bertolt Brecht

natural unity of thought and feeling.' (KM, 98). Ever the pragmatist, however, Brecht considerably modified the production before bringing it to the Paris theatre festival: he cut it, speeded up the tempo, aimed at a smoother flow, urged Paul Dessau to make the accompanying music simpler and less 'strenuous' (it had originally attracted much criticism for being distracting), and reduced the sharpness of the clash between the dramatic action and the Singer's interventions. The result appears to have been theatre that worked, (although not, of course, in the view of everybody), a production that won sympathy for Azdak's cunning on behalf of the poor (including himself!) and for the hardworking Grusha's good-hearted capacity for self-sacrifice. This was a far cry from the fierce criticisms of failure to behave in a consistently class-conscious manner which Brecht had made in a number of plays in the early 1930s. In the end, however, it may well have been a more effective way of gaining support for die gute Sache (the good cause) of working-class solidarity to which he had devoted so much of his life.

These modifications  
fit in with the  
most radical  
elements.  
Result: it  
dramatized some  
withheld  
effort (für die  
gute Sache).

Notes

1. Introduction: Life and Works

1. See *Brecht in Augsburg*, ed. W. Frisch and K. W. Obermeier (Berlin and Weimar, 1975), p. 33.
2. The most recent evidence of this kind has been supplied by Ruth Berlau (one of Brecht's numerous lovers) in her memoirs, *Brecht's Lai-Tu. Erinnerungen und Notate von Ruth Berlau*, ed. H. Bunge (Darmstadt, 1985).
3. For two contrasting accounts of Brecht's juvenilia see Reinhold Grimm, 'Brecht's Beginnings', *The Drama Review*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1967), pp. 22-35, and R. C. Speirs, 'Brecht from the beginning', *German Life and Letters*, XXXV, no. 1 (1981), pp. 37-46.
4. The line 'Cover your tracks' is the refrain of the first poem in Brecht's 'Reader for those who live in Cities' (P, 130-1).
5. Brecht's development has been much discussed. Two interesting essays on this topic are: P. Heller, 'Nihilist into Activist. Two phases in the Development of Bertolt Brecht', *Germanic Review*, vol. 28 (1953), pp. 144-55, and W. Steer, 'Baal: a Key to Brecht's Communism', *German Life and Letters*, vol. 19 (1965-6), pp. 40-51.
6. Brecht defined the aim of these playlets thus: 'The presenters of these pieces, both actors and singers, have the task of learning as they teach' (GW 17, p. 1032).
7. See E. Piscator, *The Political Theatre*, trans. H. Rorrison (London, 1980).

## Bertolt Brecht

### 7. The Life of Galileo

1. Werner Mittenzwei, *Bertolt Brecht, Von der 'Maßnahme' zu 'Leben des Galilei'* (Berlin, 1962), p. 274.
2. See Brecht, *Briefe*, ed. G. Glaeser (Frankfurt a.M., 1981), vol. 1, p. 387, p. 435.
3. *Stimme der Kritik*, Berlin-West, 17.1.57.

### 8. The Good Person of Szechwan

1. Walter Benjamin, *Versuche über Brecht* (Frankfurt a.M., 1967), p. 126.
2. Schumacher records the conversation with Brecht in his essay, 'Er wird bleiben', in Ernst Schumacher, *Brecht. Theater und Gesellschaft im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1981), pp. 9-20.
3. Review in *Theater der Zeit*, Heft 12 (1957).

### 9. The Caucasian Chalk Circle

1. For an analysis of the emotive strategy employed in the 'Struggle for the Valley', see Peter Michelsen, "'Und das Tal den Bewässerern . . .'" über das Vorspiel zum Kaukasischen Kreidekreis', in *Drama und Theater im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. H. D. Irscher and W. Keller (Göttingen, 1983), pp. 190-203.
2. GW 15, p. 60.
3. *Brechts Theaterarbeit. Seine Inszenierung des 'Kaukasischen Kreidekreises' 1954*, ed. W. Hecht (Frankfurt a.M., 1985).
4. *ibid.*, p. 197.
5. *ibid.*, p. 199.
6. *ibid.*, p. 168.
7. *ibid.*, p. 206.
8. *ibid.*, p. 202.
9. *ibid.*, p. 198.

## Bibliography

### 1. Brecht's works and related materials

- Arbeitsjournal 1938-45*, 3 vols, ed. W. Hecht (Frankfurt a.M., 1973).
- Baal. Der böse Baal, der Asoziale*, ed. D. Schmidt (Frankfurt a.M., 1968).
- Baal. Drei Fassungen*, ed. D. Schmidt (Frankfurt a.M., 1966).
- Bertolt Brecht. Die heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe. Bühnenfassung. Fragmente, Varianten*, ed. G. Bahr (Frankfurt a.M., 1971).
- Brechts 'Guter Mensch von Sezuan'* (materials), ed. J. Knopf (Frankfurt a.M., 1982).
- Brechts 'Kaukasischer Kreidekreis'* (materials), ed. W. Hecht (Frankfurt a.M., 1985).
- Brechts 'Leben des Galilei'* (materials), ed. W. Hecht (Frankfurt a.M., 1981).
- Brechts 'Mann ist Mann'* (materials), ed. C. Wege (Frankfurt a.M., 1982).
- Brechts 'Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder'* (materials), ed. K. D. Müller (Frankfurt a.M., 1982).
- Brechts Theaterarbeit. Seine Inszenierung des 'Kaukasischen Kreidekreises' 1954* (materials), ed. W. Hecht (Frankfurt a.M., 1985).
- Brecht inszeniert. 'Der kaukasische Kreidekreis'* (photos by G. Goedhart, text by A. Hurwicz) (Frankfurt a.M., 1964).
- Bertolt Brecht on Stage* (materials, photographs) (Frankfurt a.M., 1968).
- Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. J. Willett (London, 1974).
- Briefe*, ed. G. Glaeser (Frankfurt a.M., 1981).

## Bertolt Brecht

- Collected Plays*. Eyre Methuen edition, ed. J. Willett and R. Manheim (London, 1970 onwards).  
*Diaries 1920-1922*, ed. H. Ramthun, trans. J. Willett (London, 1979).  
*Gesammelte Werke*. Suhrkamp edition, 20 vols (Frankfurt a.M., 1967).  
*Materialien zu Brechts 'Der kaukasische Kreidekreis'*, ed. W. Hecht (Frankfurt a.M., 1968).  
*Materialien zu Brechts 'Leben des Galilei'*, ed. W. Hecht (Frankfurt a.M., 1968).  
*Materialien zu Brechts 'Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder'*, ed. W. Hecht (Frankfurt a.M., 1967).  
(The materials in these volumes are not identical with those in the more recent editions)  
*Poems*, ed. J. Willett and R. Manheim (London, 1979).  
*Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, trans. F. Jones (London, 1976).  
*Tagebücher 1920-1922. Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen 1920-54*, ed. H. Ramthun (Frankfurt a.M., 1975).  
*The Messingkauf Dialogues*, trans. J. Willett (London, 1964).  
*Trommeln in der Nacht* (Munich, Drei Masken, 1922).

### 2. Biographical

- Brecht as They Knew Him*, ed. H. Witt, trans. J. Peet (London, 1975).  
*Brecht in Augsburg*, ed. W. Frisch and K. W. Obermeier (Berlin, 1975).  
A. Bronnen, *Tage mit Bertolt Brecht* (Munich, 1960).  
M. Kesting, *Bertolt Brecht in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Hamburg, 1959).  
J. K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America* (Princeton, 1980).  
D. Pike, *German Writers in Soviet Exile* (Chapel Hill, 1982).  
F. Sternberg, *der dichter und die ratio* (Göttingen, 1963).  
K. Völker, *Brecht-Chronik* (Munich, 1971).  
K. Völker, *Brecht: A Biography*, trans. J. Nowell (London, 1979).

### 3. Critical (mainly English)

- E. Bentley, *The Brecht Commentaries 1943-80* (New York and London, 1981).  
*Bertolt Brecht: Political Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. B. Weber and H. Heinen (Manchester, 1980).  
*Brecht in Perspective*, ed. G. Bartram and A. Waine (London, 1982).  
*Brecht: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. P. Demetz (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962).

## Bibliography

- Brechts Dramen. Neue Interpretationen*, ed. W. Hinderer (Stuttgart, 1984).  
K. Dickson, *Towards Utopia: A Study of Brecht* (Oxford, 1978).  
*Essays on Brecht*, ed. S. Mews and H. Knust (Chapel Hill, 1974).  
M. Esslin, *Brecht. A Choice of Evils* (London, 1959).  
F. Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht. His Life, his Art and his Times* (London, 1970).  
R. Gray, *Brecht the Dramatist* (Cambridge, 1976).  
R. Grimm, *Bertolt Brecht* (Stuttgart, 1971).  
R. Grimm, *Bertolt Brecht. Die Struktur seines Werkes* (Nuremberg, 1959).  
C. Hill, *Bertolt Brecht* (Boston, 1975).  
W. Hinck, *Die Dramaturgie des späten Brecht* (Berlin, 1962).  
W. Mittenzwei, *Von der 'Maßnahme' zu 'Leben des Galilei'* (Berlin, 1962).  
M. Morley, *Brecht: A Study* (London, 1977).  
J. Needle and P. Thomson, *Brecht* (Oxford, 1981).  
D. Pike, *Lukács and Brecht* (Chapel Hill, 1985).  
J. M. Ritchie, *Brecht, 'Der kaukasische Kreidekreis'* (London, 1976).  
*Sinn und Form. Zweites Sonderheft Bertolt Brecht* (Berlin, 1957).  
M. Spalter, *Brecht's Tradition* (Baltimore, 1967).  
R. C. Speirs, *Brecht's Early Plays* (London, 1982).  
A. Subiotto, *Bertolt Brecht's Adaptations for the Berliner Ensemble* (London, 1975).  
A. White, *Bertolt Brecht's Great Plays* (London, 1978).  
J. Willett, *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht. A Study from Eight Aspects* (London, 1959).  
J. Willett, *Brecht in Context. Comparative Approaches* (London, 1984).

### 4. Collected Reviews

In addition to the following items, a number of the 'materials' volumes contain reviews of productions.

- H. Jhering, *Von Reinhardt bis Brecht*, 3 vols (Berlin, 1958-61).  
G. Rühle, *Theater für die Republik* (Frankfurt a.M., 1967).  
E. Schumacher, *Brecht-Kritiken* (Berlin, 1977).  
M. Wyss, *Brecht in der Kritik* (Munich, 1977).